

### The Arms Race Returns (or It Never Went Away)

Our elections are an arms race to see who can raise the most campaign cash -- and today's political strategy is to promote a high cash intake and downplay fundraising efforts that fall short of that goal. Candidates promote these dollar figures as "proof" that their campaign is viable.

Recent Federal Election Commission filings are once again serving as a litmus test for which candidates for Congress are "real" and which are in trouble for next year's congressional races.

The most recent numbers are also a reminder that the problem of big money in politics is getting worse. The FEC reported last month that fundraising for U.S. House and U.S. Senate candidates had topped \$250 million over the first six months of the year. Despite the economic downturn, we're on track to have one of the most expensive midterm election cycles ever. That translates into candidates spending more time than ever before dialing for dollars and rubbing elbows with the wealthy and powerful rather than listening to regular voters concerned about jobs and the economy, health care, and the need to address our nation's energy policy.

Meanwhile, in Congress...

Health care reform. Money continues to pour into the campaign coffers of members of Congress from the health insurance and pharmaceutical lobbies. This year alone, the health industries have spent more than \$260 million on lobbying and have given almost \$29 million in political contributions, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

To what end? A majority of Americans support comprehensive health care reform, but far too many elected officials in Washington, D.C. seem to side with the health industry's positions. Campaign cash is used to curry favor and buy

access that Main Street Americans just can't get.

Exempting auto dealers? Last week, the House Financial Services Committee passed a piece of legislation creating a Consumer Financial Protection Agency. Among the amendments offered in committee was one authored by Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), a former car dealer, to exempt auto dealerships from the agency's oversight.

Not only was Rep. Campbell the recipient of \$170,550 in campaign donations from auto dealers, according to the Center for Responsive Politics; he received between \$600,000 and \$6 million in rent from auto dealers in 2008. If that's not a conflict of interest, we don't know what is.

Only in Congress is this business as usual. Rep. Campbell's amendment passed 47-21. The final bill passed by a 39 to 29 vote. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, those voting against the bill "received an average of 20 percent more in contributions from financial interests over the past two-and-a-half years than the bill's supporters."

### Fair Elections Gains Momentum

Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. There is a bill that is making its way through Congress that would allow candidates to run for office without having to rely on big campaign contributions from those with interests before Congress.

Called the Fair Elections Now Act (S. 752 and H.R. 1826), the bills would create a voluntary system in which candidates could run for office on a mix of small donations and public funding. Candidates would qualify for the public grant by collecting a set number of contributions of \$100 or less. Qualified candidates could also supplement the grant with small donations of \$100 or less from people in their states that would be matched 4-to-1 by a new Fair Elections fund.

The size of the grant, coupled with the matching fund system, provides candidates with enough resources to mount competitive campaigns without relying on special interests or donations from those with business before Congress. The bipartisan Fair Elections Now Act is sponsored in the Senate by Assistant Senate Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson (D-Conn.) in the House.

The Fair Elections Now Act has 108 sponsors in the House who cover a wide spectrum of states; newly elected and veteran members; conservative, moderates, and liberals; and rank-and-file as well as leadership members. A broad base coalition is advocating for the bill. More information on the coalition, the Fair Elections Now Act, and an up to date list of co-sponsors can be found at [www.fairelectionsnow.org](http://www.fairelectionsnow.org).